

Voices: Thoughts and Images from Muncie Community Youth

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

Colleen Bradburn
Michael King

Thesis Advisors

Thomas Price
Matthew Hartman

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Tom Price", with a long horizontal line extending from the left.

**Ball State University
Muncie, Indiana**

May 2012

Expected Date of Graduation

May 2012

Abstract

Storytelling is an important facet of the human experience. Whether expressing feelings regarding elements of the world or simply relating events in day-to-day life, telling stories serves as a means of expression through which an individual is able to clarify his or her values, share his or her experience, and bolster his or her sense of self. Storytelling can be accomplished in numerous forms, including writing, photography, visual artwork, and music, though increasingly rigid educational standards and difficult budgeting situations have yielded less and less opportunity for the youth to engage in storytelling within the classroom. As such, many youth are deprived of the chance to develop voice and identity throughout the pivotal formative stage of adolescence.

One means of preventing negative outcomes for youth in a community is to provide community programs, especially those involving opportunities for self-expression and development of voice. In this project, two Ball State University students engage in one such project within the Muncie community, working with ten boys and girls at the Boys and Girls Club of Muncie. Through exercises in writing, photography, and drawing, the participating youth worked together to create the publication *Voices*, which was published both in physical form and online.

Acknowledgements

For the first six weeks of the semester, Michael King listened to me whine and complain about how much I didn't want to do my thesis and how I planned to just drop the Honors College altogether. Being the amazing friend that he is, he refused to allow that to happen and we decided to finish out this experience together. Without his prodding and encouragement I would be nowhere.

I would also like to thank Tom Price for serving as my Honors Thesis Advisor. Though it was pretty late in the game when I asked, he was fully committed and offered many helpful resources and suggestions. Thank you for your support and understanding of my scattered process – you're great.

Michael and I owe a great depth of gratitude to the Boys and Girls of Club of Muncie, both to its willing and helpful faculty members and its vibrant and inspirational youth. We extend a special token of thanks to Ms. Yolanda Bonner, whose help in promoting our project and gathering participants was crucial to our success. Thank you.

To Elisa, Chyanna, Mylasia, Haleigh, Bryce, Corrisa, DaMarion, Ayanna, Jaclynn, and Patricia, we thank you for your boundless energy, your focused efforts, and – most of all – for your voices. Because of the stories you shared, we move forward from this project inspired.

Michael and I would like to thank our close friends Kyle, Jenny and Mariah for preserving our sanity and allowing us the belief that we, indeed, might persevere and see this project through to completion.

Finally, we would like to thank McDonald's for all the delicious Diet Coke in foam cups. Without you, none of this would have been possible.

Personal Statement

The project “Voices” took shape in a dorm room at three o’clock in the morning. I was ready to completely give up on mine entirely, and told my friend Michael King that I was thinking of dropping the Honors College. Being the fantastic, if sometimes frustrating, friend that he is, he refused to allow that to happen. “Why can’t we work on a project together?” he suggested, and a hypothetical discussion of what that project might be gathered momentum like a runaway train. By the time our fledgling idea had evolved into an inspired and plausible project, we were well into the wee hours. Encouraged nevertheless, we drafted an e-mail regarding the project without a moment’s delay.

Throughout my years at Ball State University and the Journalism department I have discovered my passion for storytelling. My tendency is toward the visual side of storytelling, while Michael has long been dedicated to telling stories through his writing. We became convinced that some good could be done within the Muncie community through working with its youth in a project involving storytelling through these two forms, and we decided it could culminate in a published product called *Voices*. We’d find our participants at the Boys and Girls Club of Muncie, we decided, because we’d both had the opportunity to work with the vibrant youth who go there and we wanted to provide them a new opportunity to share their voices.

The process of preparing for such an involved and multi-dimensional project should likely have been complicated, but we were fortunate enough to find helpful hands wherever we reached. Both of our Honors Thesis Advisors were thrilled to take part in this new project, and both cited seeing our enthusiasm. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) examined our project proposal and informed us it required no additional review. When we contacted Ms. Yolanda Bonner, the Director of Programs at the Boys and Girls Club, she was incredibly enthusiastic and supportive, working with us to gather willing participants and schedule the sessions through which we could put together the project.

Throughout the six evenings we spent working with the ten children who chose to participate in putting *Voices* together, Michael and I experienced moments of triumph, challenge, and learning. Michael kept half of the group indoors to work on their writing while I took the rest outside, armed with cameras and ready to prove themselves as photographers. Though it took them a few tries to learn how to use the equipment, they slowly began to understand and discover the world anew through the camera lens. I would occasionally throw out suggestions, like trying a different angle or including a human subject, but for the most part, the students were excited to document their lives and connect their images to their words.

The process of selecting, refining, and organizing the pieces of writing and photographs these youth produced was a bit daunting, but Michael and I decided to share that decision-making process with our participants. The photos and pieces of writing found in the pages of *Voices* are not merely the product of students performing obligatory tasks, but they were selected proudly by the ten participants themselves. As such, they truly reflect the stories and the voices of the children who opted to work with us on this project.

As with most projects of this nature, the process of putting together *Voices* required some patience and adaptability. I had originally planned for the students to have photos that correlated directly to their stories, but discovered it was not always possible. While designing the book, I realized it didn't matter if the story was about spaghetti and the photo was of a girl on the playground. The students were telling their individual stories through the unique juxtapositions, and that made it all the more remarkable.

Our original plan was to show the children of the Muncie Boys and Girls Club that they had a voice and a story and it was important for them to tell it. And while I think we accomplished this goal, their stories and the time we spent with them changed me more than I would have thought possible. Their honesty and hopes for the future were simultaneously heartbreaking and inspiring, and I thank them for opening up and letting us be a part of their story.

Introduction

Storytelling is a deeply important facet of the human experience. Serving as a vital means of expression, the act of sharing stories enables an individual to clarify his or her values, share his or her experience, and bolster his or her sense of self. As human beings, we are drawn to tell stories often, expressing our feelings regarding the elements of the world we interact with and relating the events in our day-to-day lives with others. In this sense, storytelling enables the individual not only to peer deeper within, but also to build connections with other human beings. Storytelling can be accomplished via a variety of media, including writing, spoken word, music, visual art, and photography.

Unfortunately, due to a difficult economic climate and increasingly rigid educational standards, storytelling is finding less and less emphasis within the classroom, and many young people are losing opportunities to discover the power of storytelling throughout their formative adolescent years. According to the article "Education in human values (EHV): Alternative approach," this is to the detriment of the holistic student: "The main emphasis in education today lies in acquiring large amounts of information, passing examinations and securing qualifications for future employment. Children in many parts of the world are under tremendous pressure to succeed academically. As a result the jewels of childhood such as imagination and creativity are being swept aside" (Kaliannan and Chandran, 803).

According to the aforementioned article, the educational setting's struggle to balance a cognitive learning component with the emotional learning element of artistic expression leads to difficulties down the road: "Schools often have to face a dichotomy between the goals of quantitative achievements in academic standards and fostering the all important needs of the child in a holistic way where the environment nurtures self-confidence, integrity, love, and other moral values required to tackle problems such as poor discipline, bullying and vandalism. Thus, the creation of a learning environment through an appropriate methodology for the school has become very important" (Kaliannan and Chandran, 803). In a very real sense, students deprived of the opportunity to engage in storytelling and expression activities are isolated from the chance to develop key emotional skills. This lack in learning opportunities is most prevalent, as might be expected, amongst school districts characterized by poverty.

While public education is constantly seeking to adapt and reform, it's very plausible that an effective solution might be found outside the classroom. According to the article "Long-term Training in Learning and Work for Youth at Risk...", programs outside the school setting might be just the ticket to solving this problem: "The belief that community programs are an effective preventative response to the crisis of disenfranchised racialized youth has led to calls by

many social and cultural activists for better funding of such programs...Such programs include athletic as well as artistic choices for youth in their local community settings” (Carter 1).

The article goes on to discuss a number of examples, affirming that, in many cases, “youth have been able to use the skills acquired in programs to enter post-secondary institutions and eventually the labour market” (Carter 3). Through effective community programming regarding development of artistic expression, many at-risk youth have been able to find enhanced opportunities and escape the cycle of poverty. As the article points out, this is often because youth are able to understand the value of learning outside of the classroom, which is often viewed as the only place learning can occur: “Learning as it takes place within community organizations gives youth access to knowledge through informal, non-formal and tacit learning” (Carter 8).

For our Honors thesis, we endeavored to put together such a project for a population of students inhabiting neighborhoods in Muncie that might be classified as belonging to the lower end of the city’s socioeconomic spectrum. Reaching out to the Boys and Girls Club of Muncie, we conceived and implemented a program involving the participation of ten Boys and Girls Club students, all at the formative ages of nine and ten. Working with the students through exercises in writing and photography (both valuable means of storytelling), we encouraged them to share their perspective on the world. Later, we worked with the students to edit, refine, and choose their favorite works, publishing them together in a publication we called *Voices*.

The process of working with living, breathing children in the Muncie community meant clearing our project with the Institutional Review Board, or the IRB. We were given the clear to continue on with the project, though we were encouraged to inform parents of their children’s involvement, which we did through a letter provided to the Program Director of the Boys and Girls Club. Enabled to continue, we moved forward with the project.

Initially, due to our academic backgrounds in writing and in photography, we intended to focus solely on storytelling in these two forms. In our work with the youth at the Boys and Girls Club, however, we found that some were more willing to contribute drawings than written stories. As such, we opted to adapt our project a bit to include some of their artwork. For the writing aspect of the project, we encouraged the students’ stories through prompts discussing elements of the world they would like to change, important figures in their lives, and their vision for the future. For photography, we asked them to take pictures that meant something to them or the stories they had written.

Voices, the final product, spans twenty pages and includes written reflections on such topics as cyber-bullying, financial difficulty, and the need for better

environmental practices. The photographs and drawings tell stories as well, capturing striking symbols and also important figures in the lives of these children. Their enthusiasm at selecting their stories, photographs, and drawings was tangible and rewarding. The project, they told us, had been “a lot of fun.”

We opted to publish two copies of *Voices*, one for the library at the Boys and Girls Club of Muncie and one for inclusion within our Honors Thesis. For further access, we chose to publish *Voices* online, available for access at any point by the participants of our project. We also chose to grant a digital copy of the publication to the Boys and Girls Club Program Director, as she might have further use for it.

As with any project of this magnitude, there were a series of triumphs and challenges to be experienced. While we were satisfied with the work we were able to do with these students in such a short period of time, we both agreed we would have liked to have had more time to spend with them gathering stories and enabling their voices. We would have liked to reach more students of more ages, accessing different types of writing and photography to help unearth further perspectives and voices. While there are certainly elements of the project we would have done differently given the opportunity for another run, we are pleased with the project we created.

It is often difficult to imagine how one might be able to positively influence a community. While there are always opportunities to impact a community via volunteering and community service, it is sometimes difficult to imagine how one’s area of expertise – writing or photography, for example – might be utilized to the betterment of a community. This project reflects the benefit of applying one’s passions to the improvement of a community, as our own passion for storytelling was applied to raise the voices of young people within the Muncie community. The willingness of these Muncie youths to share their stories not only enabled them to develop further their use of storytelling in day-to-day life, but it also influenced our spirits, enriching our perspectives and inspiring us to seek out more stories. Indeed, the voices gathered in *Voices* were clear and meaningful and important.

Voices has also been published online and is available at <http://issuu.com/colleenfrancesbradburn/docs/voices>

Works Cited

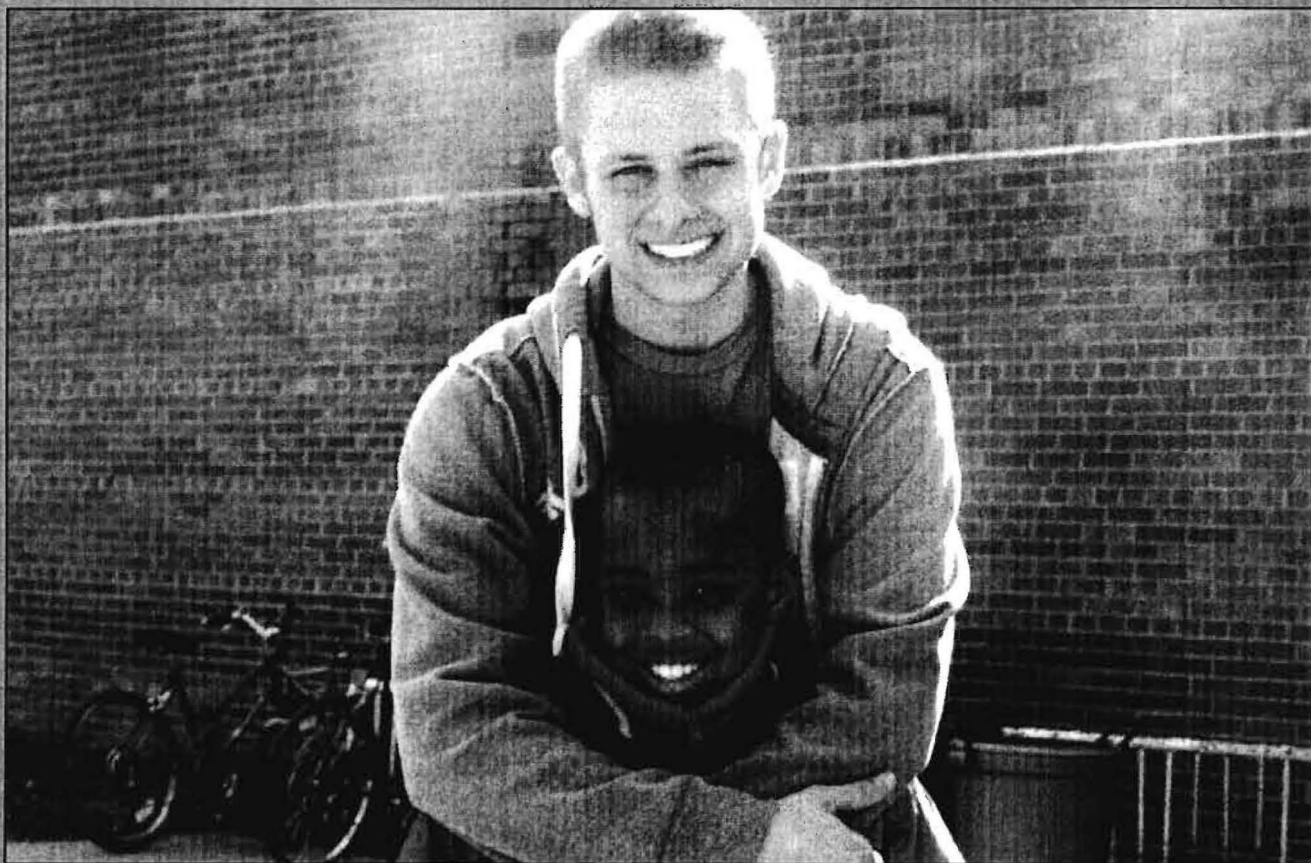
- Carter, Karen. "Long-term Training in Learning and Work for Youth at Risk: Sustainability & Creativity in Policy and Execution of Youth At Risk Programs In Toronto." Thesis. University of Toronto, 2011. Print.
- Kalianna, Maniam and Suseela Devi Chandran. "Education in Human Values (EHV): Alternative approach for a holistic teaching." Educational Research and Review Vol. 5 (12), 2010. Print.

VOICES

Thoughts and Images from Muncie Community Youth



DAMARION

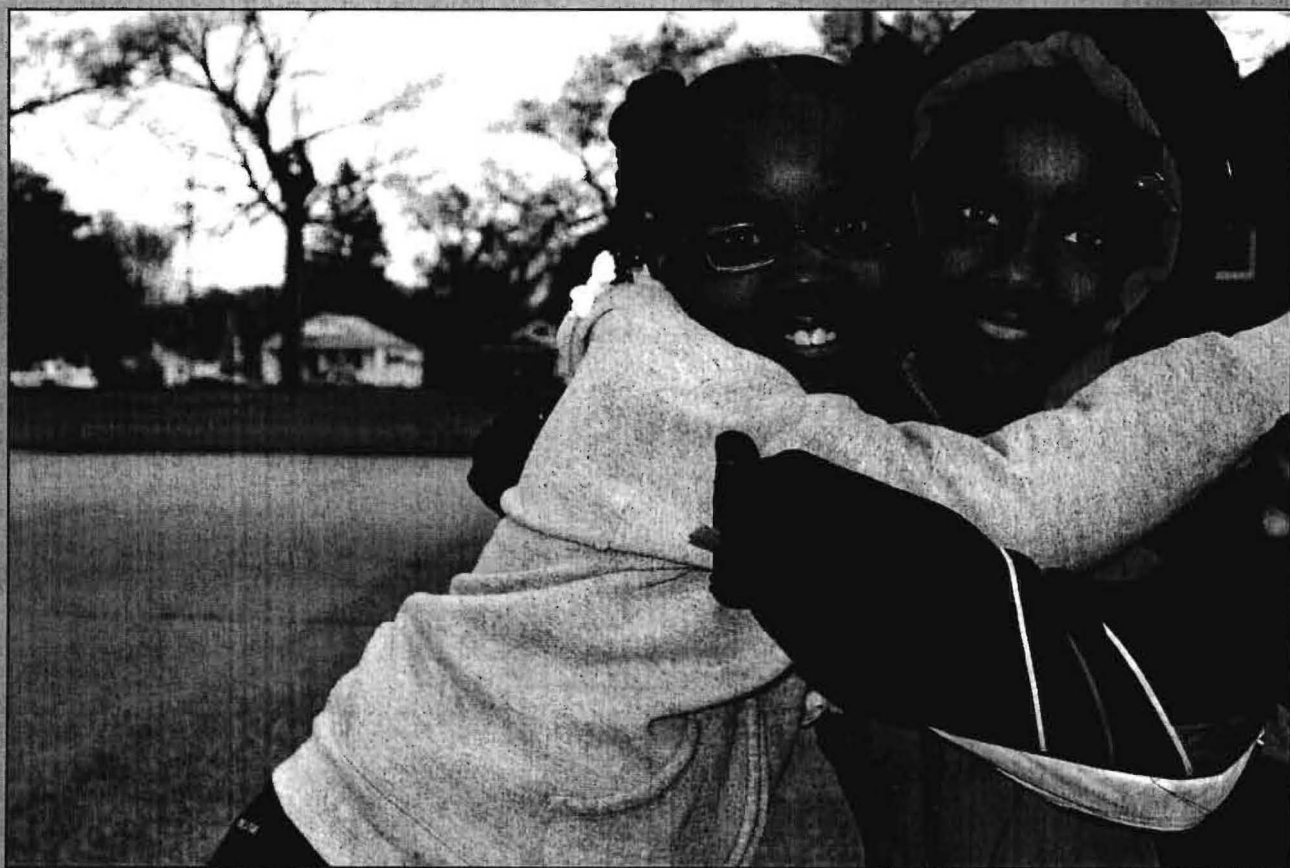


People live on earth and they do things. Some people play football, and some people have jobs. Some jobs are cooking, working at hospitals, and teaching. When they leave work, people go to their houses. Some houses are big, and other ones aren't as big. Whatever size, people call their houses home.

We have elections for presidents, mayors, and governors. These people are in charge of making laws for everybody to follow. Some things people do for fun are playing, running, and telling stories. Some people get embarrassed, and some people just laugh it off. Some old people sit in their houses and never get in the shower so they stink really badly.

Kids have fun, though. Kids are people, too. They run and play and have fun. One day they will be old people, too.

JACLYNN



I'm going to tell you about my best friend in the entire world. When I first met her, she was so nice. By the next day, I was already her friend. We played with each other and we went to each other's houses. Soon, we were godsisters, so we saw each other every day and we started calling each other sisters.

One day, we will go to our other sister's house in Indianapolis. It'll be fun. When we grow up, we are going to go to the mall together and we are going to grow up and live in Indianapolis. We are going to go to Ivy Tech and we are still going to be together. I will love my sister all my life, so when we move from Ivy Tech we are still going to be together. I have other friends, too, but she is my main friend I have ever had because I've known her all my life.

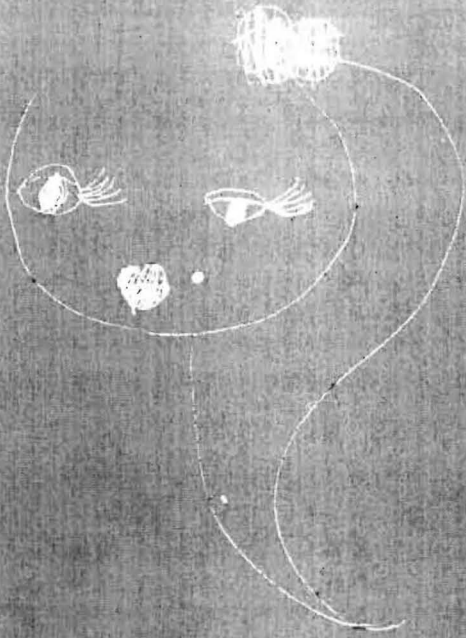
PATRICIA



My best friend in the whole wide world is my best friend because she asked to be my friend when I had no friends. She walked up to me at the Boys and Girls Club and asked would I be her friend. I said yes.

We love playing in the computer lab. We play Girls to Games. We like to paint each other's nails, run, play Uno, and go to "Afternoons Rock" together. We love playing together. We have a great relationship.

When we grow up, we will still be friends. We will always be there for each other. We will be together forever.



My favorite candy is Airheads. They come in a lot of flavors – blue raspberry, sour apple, and watermelon – and if you mix them together, it is a tropical flavor. They are super stretchy and come in all colors of the rainbow. I like to keep them in pocket until they get warm.



ELISA



If I could change one thing about the world, I would make it so that kids could drive. Instead of waiting for my parents to take me places, I would be able to take the key and just go wherever I need to go. I could go see my friends or I could go get McDonald's whenever I wanted. Whenever my parents were too tired, they would give me the key. I could go anywhere. That's what I want to change.

My favorite foods are chicken, ribs, and Salisbury steak. The reason why is because I think they have good taste. Ribs are the messiest food to eat, but there's always napkins. They're only messy if they have BBQ sauce on them, anyway. Salisbury steak is juicy. I think it's better when it has gravy on it. Chicken always tastes good, whether you put it in salad or next to your sides. My favorite foods always make me feel like taking a nap on the couch.



MY LASIA



If I could change one thing about the world, it would be gas prices. Right now, gas is just too much money. People go broke trying to drive to their jobs and their cars run on empty all the time. I would make gas cost just a penny. People could drive to work every day and still have money left over. People would be so happy that they would make me the president and I would be so rich. That is why I would change gas prices.

Cupcakes and Cookies

Cupcakes and cookies
are sweeter than life

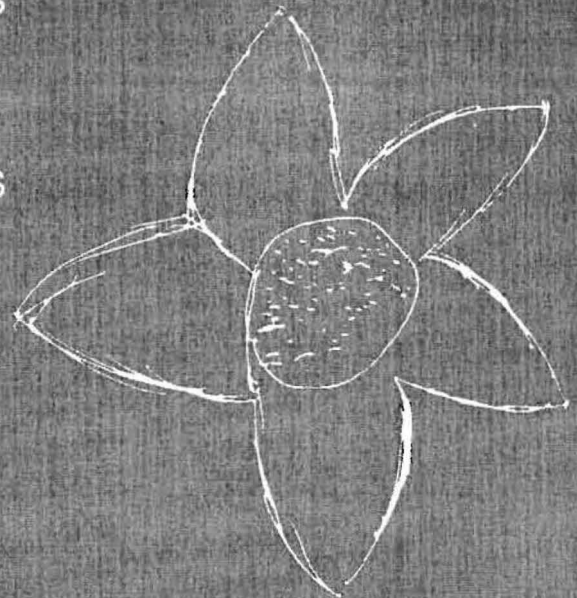
Cookies are sweet
like my favorite candy

Cupcakes are just
like a crybaby
because they are soft

My mom bakes me
cupcakes and cookies
(Sometimes she buys
them too)

I like when they
are the white kind
Covered in
rainbow sprinkles

It smells so good
my mouth waters
when I see them



CHYANNA



My favorite food is spaghetti because it tastes like noodles and meat sauce, too. They taste so good together – do you know why? I can twist just like a noodle, and you can do it, too! When I write about spaghetti, it makes me hungry. I want a big dish covered in slippery spaghetti and bright red meat sauce.

I hope you like spaghetti, too. I hope you can like it always. You probably have a favorite food, too. I eat lots and lots of food just like you. I love my favorite food! I want spaghetti for lunch and for dinner always. I want to eat it again and again.



I am grateful for my best friend. She is always giving me a hug when she sees me. I love her so, so much. We met when I was six years old. We met at the Boys and Girls Club. We played Bingo with each other and we had lots of fun. We are best friends for life. We always will be, even if she moves all the way to Ohio!

HALEIGH HALEIGH



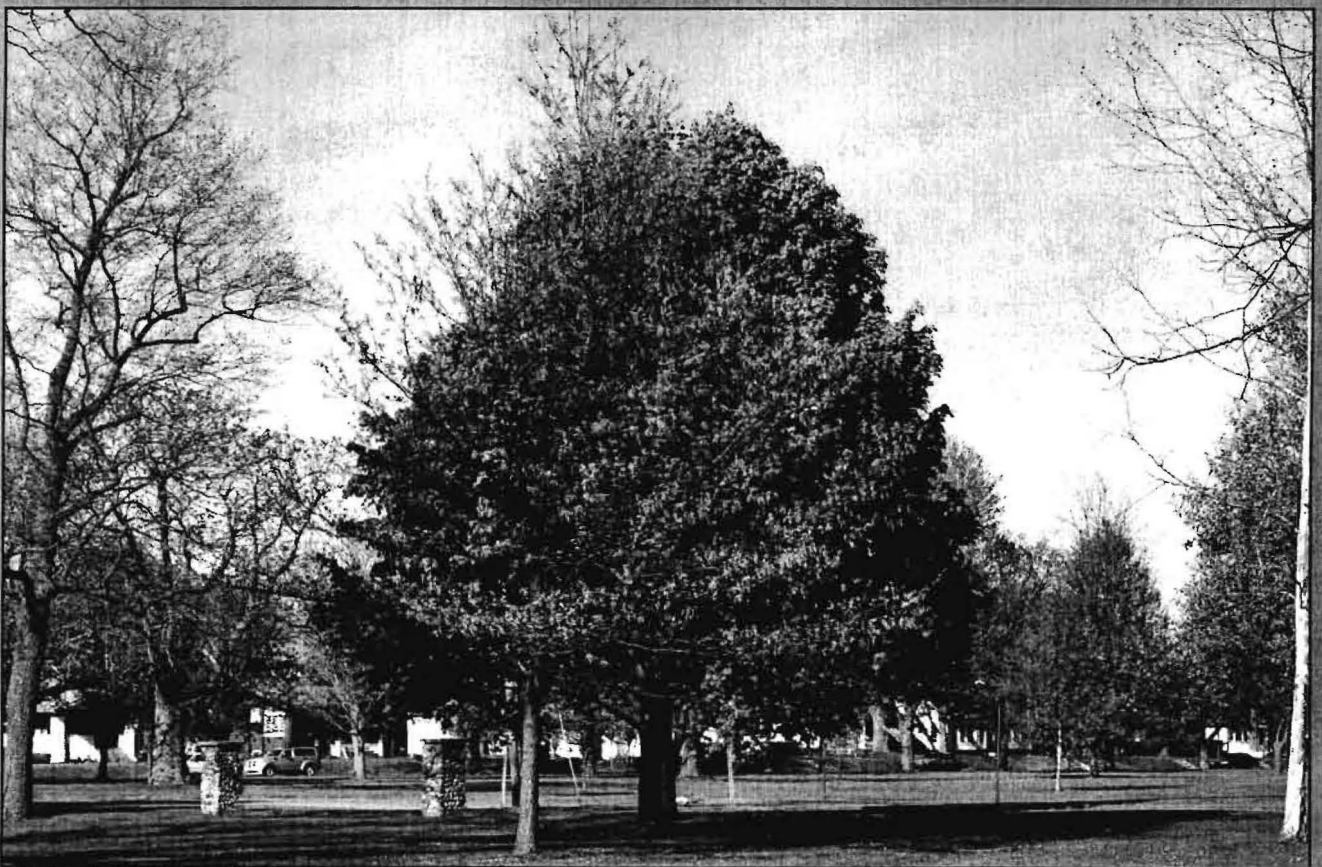
I'm going to talk about my dog Piggy. One day, I got home, and my dad's girlfriend introduced me to my new pet. It was two days after my birthday. She brought her out to me and she was the cutest thing I'd ever seen. She wanted me to take her on a walk.

On the second day, we went to the pet store and got her new things. We got her a new collar, leash, food bowls, and clothes. It was exciting buying those things for Piggy. I couldn't wait to get home and give them to her.

Some people think it's strange to have a dog named Piggy. She got her name by her curly tail and her flat face. I like her name. She is my friend.

If I could change one thing about the world, I would make it so that we used less paper. Every piece of paper we use comes from a cut-down tree, and people are not putting seeds back in their place. All of the animals are losing their homes. All of the forests are losing their color. Plants are not growing. I feel that all of the animals should have their homes because they never did anything to humans. Why should we tear down their homes? I don't know what I would do if someone tore down my home.

Why does it need to change? It should change because I can't imagine a world without trees. Trees gives us oxygen, they tell us the seasons, and you can climb into the sky with them. When the leaves change brown, red, orange, and yellow, it makes the world beautiful. Because of these things, we need to make a difference.



CORRISA

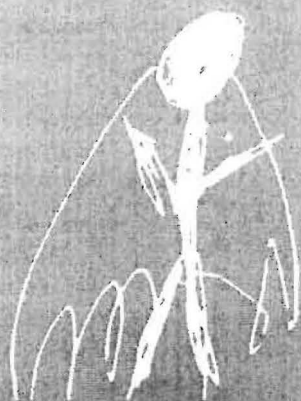


One thing I would change about the world is cyber-bullying. Cyber-bullying is when someone gets their feelings hurt online by another person. I would get rid of cyber-bullying because it is hurting a lot of kids who use the Internet. I heard a story about a girl who killed herself because she was getting bullied online. I don't know why people are mean to each other. I don't like that people get their feelings hurt. I would get rid of cyber-bullying once and for all.



When I played soccer, I was on a team called the Red Devils. They bought me a camera, and I was the team photographer. During practices and games, I would take pictures of my teammates in action. It made me happy to get the perfect photo. What makes a perfect photo is if you get it on the target or targets. A photographer has to be prepared. To be a photographer takes practice and patience. When you look at a perfect photo you've taken, it is worth all the hard work.

DRYCE BRYCE



If I could change one thing about the world, I would make it so that going to the movies did not cost so much money. I would change the prices to five dollars so that everyone could go to the movies and be happy. The way it is now, not everyone can go to the movies and have a good time.

When I think about the movies, I remember when I used to go once a week to see a movie with my friend. We would meet up at the concession stand. We would get popcorn and candy and then we'd go inside the movie and talk and laugh. When the lights went out, the movie would come on and we'd go some place else. Going to the movies is a chance to go new places. Everybody should get to do that sometimes. That is why I'd make it so that the movies would be cheaper.

AYANNA



When I grow up, I want to be a beauty stylist. I would make women's hair and makeup beautiful, and they would pay me for it. I'm going to be rich. I'll have a big house and a big car and my mom is going to be there with me. She and I will laugh and go shopping and get ice cream whenever we want it. Right now, my dad works at a car shop and my mom is still going to school. She wants to do something in Criminal Justice. That is my life right now. When I grow up, it's going to be awesome.